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490 North Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901

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Missoula, MT 59804

WESTERN MONTANA SHARP-TAILED GROUSE REINTRODUCTION DECISION NOTICE APRIL 3, 2019

Description of Proposed Action

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to re-establish self-sustainable sharp-tailed grouse (STGR) populations west of the Continental Divide by reintroductions of STGR in core areas identified to have the most suitable habitat: the Blackfoot Valley, the northern Bitterroot Valley, and the Drummond Area. FWP would capture a total of 75-180 STGR each year for 5 years across Regions 4, 5, 6, and 7. Capture locations would be dispersed in a way as to minimize impact to source populations.

Public Involvement

The Western Montana Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction draft environmental assessment was released for a 30-day public comment period on February 15, 2019. FWP posted a public notice on its webpage (http://fwp.mt.gov) and a news release was prepared and distributed to a standard list of media outlets in all regions potentially affected by the project. The draft EA was also available at all FWP Regional Headquarters and the State Headquarters in Helena. Additionally, public were notified public notices in the Flathead Beacon, Daily Inter Lake, Bozeman Chronicle, Great Falls Tribune, Missoulian, Billings Gazette, The Glasgow Courier, Havre Daily News, Miles City Star, and the Helena Independent Record.

Summary of Public Comments

FWP received 52 comments for the draft EA. One comment was received after the deadline and is not included in this decision notice. The remainder of public comments were generally positive and supportive in nature with few comments either neutral or non-supportive. Commenters raised the following issues/topics which require a response from FWP: predator control, existing STGR in the Bitterroot Valley and history of STGR in the Bitterroot Valley; the reason the STGR were extirpated; habitat assessment; opportunity to comment on the reintroduction plan; cost and funding; future hunting and outreach; source population concerns; added recreational value; future consideration for

additional relocation sites; Natural Resource Damage Program (NRD) options; taking private property rights; not a native species; sage-grouse versus STGR and protected species; MT.gov website; and no public notice sent to adjoining landowners.

FWP Responses to Public Comments

1. **Predator control:** FWP received 5 comments regarding predators. One comment asked if FWP was going to control all of the predators in the area. Four comments expressed concern that reintroducing this will result in FWP controlling predator populations to improve project success. Of the four comments, two expressed very specific concerns that FWP would have the right to kill any predator that had an impact on the STGR reintroduction; "FWP will have the right void huge swaths of native animals; fox, ravens, skunks, weasels, badgers, coyotes, bobcats, hawks, endangered eagles, turkey buzzards (endangered)..." and "Part of FWPS disgusting plan allows them to wipe out and kill any predators of The Sharp Tailed Grouse bird eggs. This includes: Endangered protected eagles, red tailed hawks, falcons, turkey buzzards, great horned owls, red fox, badgers, wheasles, bob cats, racoons, skunks, coyotes, wolves..."

   FWP Response: As part of the processes leading to the EA, FWP worked with Montana State University on a reintroduction plan. Within the plan, a population viability analysis (PVA) evaluated 11 management scenarios including a predator removal scenario. Mammalian predator impacts on nest survival were not included in the PVA because previous research found no effect of mesopredator trapping on nest success (Wiens 2007). While peer-reviewed literature suggests that for greater sage-grouse the removal of ravens can increase nest survival by 73% (Coates and Delehanty 2004), this increase did not hold true for STGR (M.C. Milligan et al 2018). Populations size and persistence under the predator removal scenario was only slightly higher than baseline scenarios and did not produce a viable population (M.C. Milligan et al 2018). Given the limited value of predator management on population viability, FWP will not pursue predator control or removal at this time.

   Citations

   Coates, P. S. and D. J. Delehanty. 2004. The effects of raven removal on sage grouse nest success. Proceedings of the Vertebrate Pest Conference 21:17-20.

   Milligan, M. C., S. L. Wells, and L. B. McNew. 2018. A population viability analysis for sharp-tailed grouse to inform reintroductions. Journal of Fish and Wildlife Management. Vol. 9, 2:1-17.

   Wiens, D. 2007. Nest success and site selection of shorebirds in North Dakota. Louisiana State University, Agricultural and Mechanical College, and Simon Fraser University.

2. **STGR in the Bitterroot Valley:** FWP received one comment regarding the recent presence of STGR in the Bitterroot Valley on the Eastside Highway between Florence and Stevensville. The comment stated that the sighting was reported to the local FWP office, but no one believed the observer. Another comment spoke to the history of "prairie chickens" existing in the Bitterroot Valley which has been shared by generations of ranchers on the east side of the Bitterroots.

   FWP Response: FWP will follow-up with the individuals that provided these comments prior to any reintroduction efforts and attempt to verify the observational information provided.

3. **Why did populations of STGR in western Montana disappear:** FWP received two comments concerned with the disappearance of STGR in western Montana. The first comment suggested that it was more conventional to figure out why birds winked out in the first place before attempting to reintroduce the species, while the second comment questioned what has changed to limit survival and if there are other potential limiting factors. The second comment also suggested that even small populations of STGR should have persisted throughout the area.

   FWP Response: From a conservation and management perspective it would be ideal to know why birds disappeared from the landscape prior to implementing a restoration project. While FWP could speculate about what led to population declines of STGR in western Montana, we do not have any research which ties any specific factors to the decline. Since there are no STGR existing on the landscape in western Montana, FWP cannot determine what the limiting factors may be for existence of this species. The only way to figure out what the limiting factors are, is to restore the populations and study the response of the reintroduced birds.

4. **Habitat assessment:** FWP received several comments supporting the level of analysis completed regarding habitat. One comment received was critical of the assessment suggested that a coarse-scale habitat suitability model may not be sensitive enough to predict high quality winter habitat to sustain birds and recommended a more site-specific approach to winter habitat evaluation to increase chances for success.

   FWP Response: FWP evaluated habitat at multiple levels. The course-scale habitat suitability index (HSI) model was only the first step in our evaluation to identify the areas of habitat with the highest suitability in western Montana. The results of the HSI were a surface with 30 m pixels with a score from 1-10 with 10 being the highest possible score. FWP wanted to be conservative in our approach so prior to moving to the next step of our analysis we removed all pixels that scored less than 5. We used the resulting map as the foundation for the second step of our analysis of fine scale habitat. During this step, we visited points throughout all of the proposed reintroduction sites to collect vegetation data directly related to brood survival, nest survival, and winter survival. We then compared this data to similar data collected in central Montana and found that in most cases finer scale habitat in western Montana was as good if not better than occupied habitat in central Montana. We recognize our sample sizes were small for the wintering habitat portion of our study; however, we remain confident that we have enough winter habitat to begin restoration of STGR. As we gain more information on how STGR use the western Montana landscape we will have the opportunity for habitat restoration projects that increase winter habitat in areas used by the reintroduced populations.

5. **Opportunity to comment on the reintroduction plan:** FWP received one comment concerned about not having the opportunity to comment on the STGR Reintroduction plan that was completed in May 2017.

   FWP Response: The Restoration Plan for Sharp-tailed Grouse Recovery in Western Montana was completed in May 2017 with the assistance of Montana State University. The purpose of the plan was to expand on habitat assessment work completed in 2015 with additional analysis in the form of PVAs which would provide FWP with more information regarding the feasibility of STGR reintroduction efforts. More specifically, the PVA within the plan evaluated 11 management scenarios that modified vital rates according to their response to management. Rather than evaluate the entire restoration plan and every management scenario, FWP chose to complete an

environmental assessment on only the scenarios that produce minimum viable populations that had a 95% probability of persisting for at least 50 years.

6. **Cost and funding:** FWP received one commented that without costs of the reintroduction it was difficult to evaluate the cost effectiveness of the proposal. Another comment suggested FWP work with the NRD for funding habitat restoration and acquisitions. One commenter stated that if the project moves forward they could assist with funding.

   FWP Response: FWP recognizes the importance of costs and funding for the reintroduction of STGR and will work with Wildlife Division Administrator and project staff to adequately evaluate the cost effectiveness of the reintroduction project and works with partners to secure funding prior to the implementation of the project.

7. **Future hunting and outreach:** FWP received 5 comments regarding hunting and outreach of reintroduced populations. Four of those comments focused on the possibility of a huntable population of STGR in western Montana and the potential future opportunities for the sporting community. One comment focused on the need for FWP to make hunters aware of STGR presence to avoid accidental take. This comment also suggested that FWP avoid rushing to create a hunting season until there is certainty that the populations can withstand hunting.

   FWP Response: The initial focus of the project is to establish viable STGR populations. Hunting STGR west of the Continental Divide may be possible in the future, but will require Fish and Wildlife Commission approval. FWP agrees that before any hunting of STGR is proposed, we will have to understand population dynamics and limiting factors that contributed to the long-term viability of the reintroduced populations. We also agree that an information and education campaign for Region 2 hunters is vital to avoid accidental take and, if reintroduction does occur, we will coordinate the sharing of this information with the hunting public.

8. **Source population concerns:** FWP received 5 comments regarding source populations used for reintroduction efforts. It was recommended that FWP monitor source populations so that one existing population is not sacrificed inadvertently for the sake of another. One comment stated that the statewide decline in hunter harvest should be considered as it pertained to source leks in Regions 4-7 with the possibility of postponing reintroduction efforts to allow source populations to rebound. Another comment stated the EA adequately addressed concerns for the removal of too many source birds from existing leks; source birds need to come from stable populations. One comment suggested that FWP could increase the annual transplant size without noticeably impacting recreational harvest or grouse populations east of the Continental Divide.

   FWP Response: If the project is approved, FWP will monitor demographic rates of relocated birds as well as birds remaining at source populations. While FWP believes that additional birds from source populations would likely not impact recreational harvest we are still sensitive to the concerns regarding the removal of STGR from eastern Montana during a period of declining hunter harvest. FWP is comfortable recommending the removal of the number of birds needed for this project, which is less than 1% of lowest harvest in the previous 5 years (2013-2017). FWP collaborated with a group of STGR researchers from Montana State University to develop protocols that limit impacts on source populations. Specifically, under Section 3.3 of the EA, we evaluate the effects of the project on source populations. "STGR are a lekking species where males gather at specific locations to compete for breeding with visiting females. At each lek, only a few dominant males do all the

breeding annually, so each year the majority of males are surplus. There are currently 241 mapped STGR leks with at least 15 males from lek survey data across Montana. This data represents a minimum estimate of STGR leks on the landscape. There are other leks that meet this criterion, but they are not included in this dataset. Only leks with at least 15 males will be considered as sources for reintroduction efforts as these leks are large enough to avoid deleterious effects of removals from the population and geographically diverse enough to provide genetic diversity and similar habitat structures to each of the proposed reintroduction sites."

9. **Recreational value:** FWP received 4 comments regarding reintroduced STGR populations on recreation in western Montana. "While I think hunting opportunities would be minimal, the viewing of lekking behavior would certainly be welcome by Western MT birders." "The opportunity to see a STGR while stalking a deer, calling to an elk or searching for sheds would add immensely to the experience and recreation value of western Montana." "Birders in particular would be thrilled to see Sharptails again in that area." "An increase in non-consumptive experiences is even more likely, with bird watchers, photographers, ecologists, tribes, and landowners enjoying the bird once again across the landscapes of western Montana."

   FWP Response: This project embraces FWP's unifying message that the "The Outside Is In Us All." It is exciting, that as an agency, we have the capacity to conserve, protect, and enhance wildlife populations like STGR and renew the public's opportunity to experience STGR dancing once again in their former range.

10. **Conserved landscapes:** FWP received three comments regarding conservation landscapes specifically the Blackfoot Valley. These comments focused on the large amounts public land and of properties under conservation easement that could provide the extensive grasslands and shrublands required for STGR. They also mention the success of the Blackfoot Challenge in completing habitat restoration and protection as well as the success of the trumpeter swan reintroduction.

    FWP Response: FWP recognizes the importance of working in landscapes where the community has demonstrated its role in conservation. The Blackfoot Challenge is a good example of this and FWP welcomes the opportunity to work with this group as well as the communities and groups in any area that may be approved for the reintroduction of STGR.

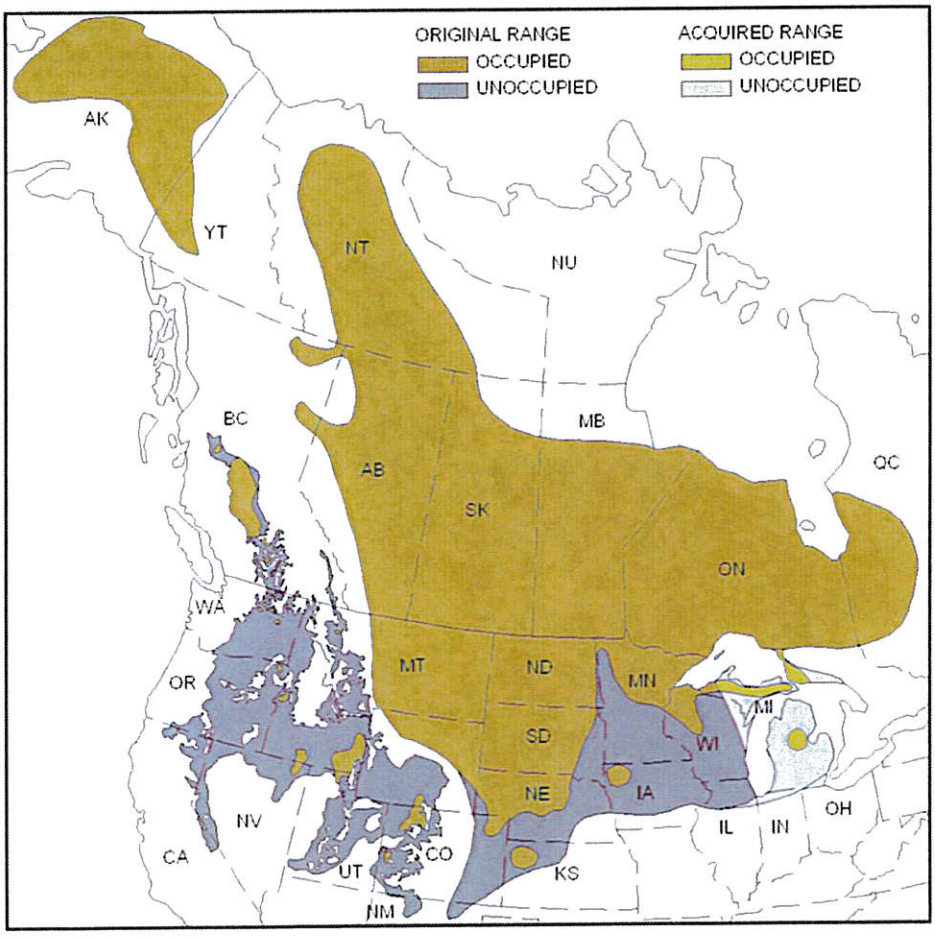
11. **Future consideration of other sites:** FWP should consider the following sites for reintroduction of STGR in the future: Spotted Dog, Flint Creek, and Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes land (Flathead Indian Reservation).

    FWP Response: In our initial habitat assessment, FWP built a habitat suitability model for all of western Montana west of the Continental Divide to identify core areas of the best STGR habitat. Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area, the Flint Creek Area, and the Flathead Indian Reservation all included suitable habitat, but were not areas of "high suitability" like the three proposed areas. If reintroductions to the areas evaluated in the EA were successful, FWP could consider additional sites. However, any new site proposed would have to undergo a new environmental assessment and chance for public input.

12. **Not a native species:** FWP received 3 comments stating that STGR were not a species of wildlife native to Montana. Two comments referred to the MT.gov Website as their source of information.

One of these comments accused FWP of creating the information on the webpage to show that STGR are native to Montana.

FWP Response: For a short time during the public comment period, the MT.gov Animal Field Guide site was down and the page for STGR stated there was no information on the species in the state. FWP worked with the Montana Natural Heritage Program to fix the webpage. After the webpage was fixed, FWP shared the link with the commenter. The commenter replied that there was nothing wrong with the page when they used it for information. FWP uses multiple sources of information to ensure the accuracy of our EAs. According to Schroeder et al. 2004, the STGR is the most widespread and common of the North American prairie grouse (see figure below). The following is a list of additional resources that indicate STGR are native to all parts of Montana: A Distribution List of the Birds of Montana with Notes on the Migration and Nesting of the Better-Known Species (Saunders and Bailey 1921); Distribution, Habitat Selection and Survival of Transplanted Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus columbianus*)in the Tobacco Valley (Cope 1992); Conservation of Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse, with Emphasis on the Upper Blackfoot Valley, Montana (Deeble 1996); Subspecific Identification of Sharp-tailed Grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*) Samples from Montana (Warheit and Dean 2009); Montana's State Wildlife Action Plan (Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks 2015); and Birds of Montana (Marks et al. 2016).



Citations

Cope, M. G. 1992. Distribution, habitat selection and survival of transplanted Columbian sharp-tailed grouse (Tympanuchus phasianellus columbianus) in the Tobacco Valley, Montana. Montana State University, Bozeman, MT, USA.

Deeble, B. D. 1996. Conservation of Columbian sharp-tailed grouse, with special emphasis on the Upper Blackfoot Valley, Montana. University of Montana, Missoula, MT, USA.

Marks, J. S., P. Hendricks, and D. Casey. 2016. Birds of Montana. Buteo Books, Arrington, Virginia.

Saunders, A. A. and F. M. Bailey. 1921. A distributional list of the birds of Montana with notes on the migration and nesting of the better-known species. Pacific Coast Avifauna 14.

Schroeder, M. A., R. K. Baydack, S. A. Harmon, C. A. Hagen, D. M. Davis, S. K. Sherrod, S. DeMaso, R. W. Hoffman, T. Z. Riley, J. B. Haufler, and R. R. Manes. 2004. North American grouse management plan. North American Grouse Partnership, Williamsport, Maryland, USA.

Warheit, K. I. and C. A. Dean. 2009. Subspecific identification of sharp-tailed grouse (Tympanuchus phasianellus) samples from Montana. Report submitted to: Big Sky Upland Bird Association, Montana Department Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Molecular Genetics Laboratory, Olympia, WA, USA.

13. **Sage Grouse (protected species) and take of private property versus STGR:** We received 4 comments regarding the conservation status of STGR. Two of those comments used STGR and sage grouse interchangeably. One comment objected to "adding another extremely expensive and time consuming endangered species to the already loaded list of plant and, animals, and fish." Another comment stated that "Now that this species is consider protected in the state of Montana..."

    FWP Response: Greater sage-grouse and STGR are two different species. STGR are not a state or federally listed species in Montana and are not tied to the Governor's Executive Orders for the Montana Sage Grouse Conservation Strategy. Given STGR have no legislative protections taking of private property is not a concern with this project. STGR are common across areas east of the Continental Divide with a state status ranking of S4 (apparently secure). West of the Continental Divide STGR are considered a species of concern with a state status ranking of SX (presumed extinct or extirpated). If the reintroduction were successful, it is possible that the state status ranking would be reevaluated and upgraded to a lower risk status.

14. **No public notice sent to adjoining landowners:** FWP received one comment regarding public notice. "FWP is corrupt by its illegal, secretive tactics. These tactics, which are being used, by way of: no public communication, no public notice sent to adjoining property owners or surround area property owners and no public announcements made prove my point that they wish to hide what they are implementing against the public and not for the public. Also, FWPS' Covert method of planting the hidden and hard to find notice, and assessment on their website prove my point. Along with, the impossible hidden spot to make and read all comments written on this subject by the community. If they were above board and not using deceptive practice it would show by the ease to view all information and make public comments."

    FWP Response: We have only identified broad landscapes over 5,000 hectares that have the highest habitat suitability and provide the greatest opportunity for successful reintroductions. We have also identified 214 leks that may serve as potential sources. Pending the Fish and Wildlife Commission's decision, FWP will begin having conversations with all landowners in the project areas to prioritize

capture and relocation sites so that all landowners in the area are aware of our efforts. FWP posted a public notice on its webpage: http://fwp.mt.gov, a news release was prepared and distributed to a standard list of media outlets in all regions potentially affected by the project. The public were also notified with public notices in the *Flathead Beacon, Daily Inter Lake, Bozeman Chronicle, Great Falls Tribune, Missoulian, Billings Gazette, The Glasgow Courier, Havre Daily News, Miles City Star, and the Helena Independent Record.* The EA was released for a 30-day public comment period on February 15, 2019. The draft EA was also available at all FWP Regional Headquarters and the State Headquarters in Helena. The public can request all the information and public comments from FWP.

FWP Recommended Alternative and Final Decision Recommendation

In reviewing all the public comments and other relevant information, and evaluating the environmental effects, we recommend that the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve Alternative B, Reintroduction of Sharp-tailed Grouse in the Blackfoot Valley, the Northern Bitterroot Valley, and the Drummond Area. FWP believes the completion of this alternative provides the best opportunity for returning self-sustaining, viable populations of STGR to western Montana.

Based on the draft EA, which has not identified any significant negative impacts by the proposed action to Montana's STGR population, an EIS is not required, an EA is the appropriate level of review. Noting and including the responses to public comments, the draft EA will become the final EA and together with this decision notice will serve as the final documents for this proposal.

Jim Williams
Region One Supervisor

4/4/2019
Date

Randy Arnold
Region Two Supervisor

4/3/2019
Date